

Greek Immigration to Illinois

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Ancient Greece was a civilization that lasted from 3000 B.C. to 146 B.C. Ancient Greece included all of Greece, parts of Italy, and areas around the Aegean Sea. Greeks are the proud heirs of an ancient civilization, and the influence of the country's eventful past is felt all around the world. Greeks were among the earliest seafarers in the Mediterranean, shaping a maritime tradition that continues today with Greek domination of global shipping networks. The ideas of great men such as Plato and Hippocrates laid the foundation for Western philosophy and medicine. The Greeks also gave the world an enduring mythology, one of the earliest alphabets ever invented, and the Olympic Games, the most prestigious international sporting event today. Modern Greeks are something of a paradox. Some adhere to traditional superstitions that might surprise visitors and invite criticism for being "unscientific." Yet Greek experts boast several advances in research. There are many aspects of a culture born of two worlds, ancient and modern. Modern Greece is a country in Europe.

The first Greeks to come to America were sailors. Greek sailors traveled with Christopher Columbus on his voyage to America, possibly as early as 1492. The Mississippi River served as an important water way to help transport Greeks up to Chicago in the 1840s where many became traders.

Even with the elusive promise of a better life in America, the journey from Greece was not an easy one. However, after enduring severe hardships in Greece, Greeks were ready for a new beginning. In Greece, after 1890, the economy was in the final

stages of collapse. Crop and soil conditions had deteriorated and the cost of property continued to rise; in addition there was little employment, and the pressure for providing enough money for a daughter's dowry and paying off debts were issues that faced Greeks. By the early 1900s one in four Greek men had gone to America.

Many worked for small businesses, sold food from street stands, and shined shoes. Many men rose to the challenge of finding new opportunities in America. The ones that sold fruit, flowers, and food out of small carts set up along the street were often called peddlers. When they saved enough money, they usually bought larger businesses. Many Greek immigrants owned and operated candy stores, shoeshine parlors, tobacco shops, theaters, restaurants, flower shops and grocery stores. They left their family behind, promising them a better life when they returned with money earned from their success in America. Many thought they would be in America only a short time. They were prepared to work hard, send money back to their families, pay off debts, and eventually return home.

With the United States serving as a new home for immigrants escaping troubles in Europe, the Bureau of Immigration formed in 1890. The immigration station opened in 1892 on New York's famed Ellis Island. Therefore, the first stop for the Greek immigrants in America was Ellis Island. This immigration station was a group of 12 buildings just off the shore of New York City. Many Greeks came through this station in the 1890s.

The journey to America by steamship often took as long as three months. Beds were tightly packed, sometimes stacked in three-tiered bunks. There was little food to eat, and disease abounded along with sea sickness. The Statue of Liberty was a welcome

sight. Once at Ellis Island, a factory-like system was enforced to move immigrants through the inspection process. This process took days.

Once in America, Greeks sought out the larger cities to begin their new lives. The urban environment allowed for employment opportunities and the ability to find countrymen that spoke their native language. Immigrants flowed into Chicago for an opportunity to be part of the rebirth and industrialization of the city following the Great Fire. The census reports 245 Greeks in Chicago in 1890. However in 1900 the number totaled 1,493 and in 1920 it was estimated at 15,000.

For Greek Americans, one of the most influential factors in the transition of life in Greece to life in Chicago was the creation of the world-famous social settlement, Hull House in 1889. Established by the passionate Jane Addams, known by many as “The Saint of Halsted Street,” the Hull House served an important role in unifying Greeks and enhancing their self-image. It also offered help to new immigrants to learn English, find child care, and get a job. The Hull House is situated in what is known as Greektown in Chicago, around Halsted and Harrison streets.

Jane Addams admired Greek culture, and felt that the modern Greeks, who had come there to make America their home, possessed many of the virtues of their ancestors. To the Greeks, “filoxenia” or hospitality is almost a religion. The same root word “filo” or friend is added to the Greek work “xeno,” or stranger, indicating that Greeks did not differentiate between the way one treated a friend and the way one treated a stranger. They formed tight-knit communities. This sense of belonging served immigrants well. With a new independence it put many on the path to run their own businesses.

In 1892, Chicago Greeks held the first church service in a rented warehouse located at Randolph and Union streets near the produce market where most Greeks worked. The Greek Orthodox Church visited the United States, and specifically, Chicago. It began in a warehouse and eventually established a permanent home in 1910, located at 1017 North LaSalle at Oak Street. The church was not just a place of worship. It was also the center of activity in the Greek community. The church was a place for women and men to meet and talk with other Greek families. Family and religion were the most important parts of Greek life.

In Chicago, an area on the near west side of the city became known as Greektown or the “Delta.” Today, some of this area is the present location of the University of Illinois at Chicago campus. A four-block stretch remains, from Monroe to Van Buren on Halsted Street, the home of the present day Greektown. At one point, there were many Italians living in the Greek Delta who had succeeded the Polish and Irish. The Greeks gradually displaced them, forming the largest and most concentrated Greek community in the United States. Greek men married and unmarried, enjoyed coffee shops (of kaffenia) for socializing. Each of the more than one hundred coffee shops in the Delta tended to represent a different region of Greece. These structures provided a social outlet for men to escape their crowded living conditions and interact with a family-like community network. Men spoke of news from Greece, expounded their philosophies to willing listeners, or kept current on events in their new home—Chicago and the United States.

Also, several Greek newspapers organized, including the *Greek Star* in 1904 which celebrated one hundred years of continuous publishing in 2004. The paper began in the Greek language, but slowly introduced English to help serve both as an educational

tool to practice English, as well as to meet the needs of first-and second- generation immigrants.

The Greek community has retained many of the traditions which make it unique. It has grown a new image, but its foundation is its citizens, the sons and daughters of immigrants. Greeks are people with a strong work ethic, a solid faith in God, and in each other. Proud of their heritage, they are still ready to show the world that they are Americans. [From *Children of the World, Greece*; Alexa Ganakos, *Greektown Chicago Its History – Its Recipes*; Rosemary Wallner, *Greek Immigrants 1890-1920*; Lisa Wroble, *Kids in Ancient Greece*; and Yeoh Hong Nam, *Countries of the World Greece*.]